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Book Review

Compte rendu de livre

Decoding Your Dog: The Ultimate Experts Explain Common Dog Behaviors and Reveal How to Prevent or Change Unwanted Ones

Horwitz DE, Ciribassi J, Dale S. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, New York, USA, 2014. 360 pp. ISBN: 9780-5477-3891-8. \$21.94.

If ever there was an instruction manual for the pet dog, this would be it. This book is fantastic, and I started recommending it to clients before I was even finished reading it. If you see dogs at all in your practice, you really should give it a read.

“Decoding Your Dog” was written by members of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. Its aim is “to make available to dog owner’s scientifically correct information about dog behavior problems and to correct widespread misinformation about dog behavior.” It accomplishes this in a well-organized, methodical, and logical fashion.

There are 14 chapters, including chapters covering canine communication, choosing the right dog, how dogs learn, house-training, humane training tools, puppy training, children and dogs, aggression, separation anxiety, sound phobia, compulsive behaviors, and aging. There is also an appendix with details regarding crate training, a glossary, and recommended resources. Important points and definitions are highlighted in grey squares throughout the chapter, and are summarized in a list, “What Did We Say?” at the end of each chapter.

It is also wonderful how logical this book is, and how thoroughly it debunks the myths perpetuated by trainers and charismatic TV personalities who recommend dominance and punishment-based training methods.

Many of the old-fashioned dominance-based training methods have been very damaging to dogs, creating unwanted behaviors in and of themselves. For example, the authors explain how

the convention of “preventing” food guarding by taking food away without warning can take a dog that previously had no issues with humans around his food dish, and make him believe that, for some unknown reason, his owner wants his kibble, even though he is hungry and it is HIS! Over time, this can actually create a dog that eats faster and faster to avoid losing his precious meal, or even escalates to growling and snapping at approaching people, whether or not they were going to take his food. “How would you respond if you were at a restaurant with your second mouthful of chocolate mousse on the spoon and the server gave you a big hug and then proceeded to snatch away your dessert, including that spoonful already in your hand?” Instead, the authors recommend periodically adding a treat food to the meal partway through, “bonus,” which can encourage the dog to be more accepting, or even look forward to, humans near the dish.

It was refreshing how simple some of the explanations of dog behavior were: Dog pulls when you are walking? Maybe he does it because he is excited to be out on a walk with you, and cannot wait to explore the world as quickly as possible. Maybe you have never taught your dog in a way he can understand what you consider an acceptable way to walk on a leash. Maybe the tools you have been using to walk your dog send him confusing signals. Maybe he isn’t getting enough exercise. Dogs are not vengeful creatures, as humans can be, and generally don’t behave badly out of a desire to hurt you.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I have a strong interest in animal behavior, and have read many other behavior books, including Karen Pryor’s “Reaching the Animal Mind” and “Don’t Shoot the Dog.” This book fits in nicely with these staples.

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